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ABSTRACT

A discussion of English as a Second Language (ESL) in the workplace looks at current challenges and future educational needs. It begins with an overview of adult immigrant demographics in the United States and federal government conclusions about the kinds of skills needed by this population. Challenges facing immigrant workplace education are then reviewed. They include the volume of services needed, fragmentation of service delivery, reluctance to offer ESL in the workplace when it is available elsewhere, disagreement over whether ESL should be considered education or training, and tension over curriculum between advocates of workplace education and workforce development. It is argued that despite a lack of research on workplace language tasks, some basic language functions are identified, including those of getting a job, surviving in the workplace, and thriving on a job. Some indicators of the quality of workplace education programs are outlined, and characteristics of successful delivery models are described. Costs and funding are also discussed briefly. (MSE) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education)

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Office of Refugee Resettlement English Language Training Consultations

ESL and the Employment Connection

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Definitions and Numbers

English as a second language (ESL) in the workplace takes so many forms that it is difficult to define from practice. It may take the form of a general or life skills ESL course which happens in a workplace setting. Other than the setting there may be no difference in curriculum or emphasis than one would find in an educational institution or a community based organization. For others, ESL in the workplace takes the form of coaching non-native speakers of English in the vocabulary of a particular job or process. More recently, ESL in the workplace has come to mean a corpus of oral and written language necessary to successfully work in a specific job, workplace, or occupation, and, perhaps, the English to cope in the surrounding community as well. It is this last definition that I will use here, as my working (no pun intended) definition.

Some Statistics

Although immigrants are settling all over the United States, the majority of them reside in large, metropolitan areas, primarily New York City, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Houston, Miami, Chicago and Washington, DC. Seven states—California, New York, Texas, Florida, Illinois, Massachusetts and New Jersey —each have at least half a million foreign-born residents. Half of the immigrants and refugees in California have arrived since 1980, and it is predicted that California will soon become the first state in the continental US with the majority of the residents having a Third World ethnic heritage.

Most adult immigrants seek employment quickly once they have arrived. However, 37% of the immigrant population over 20 years old has less than a high school education. This weak educational background, coupled with the general lack of proficiency in English, hampers most immigrants' ability to become economically self sufficient quickly. Moreover, this is not a short term problem. Many recent immigrant populations are young, with average ages in the 20s, and these immigrants should have long working careers ahead of them. Let me illustrate from refugee populations.

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Average Age Distribution of Refugees

Hmong	13 years
Cambodian	18 years
Laotian	19 years
Vietnamese	21 years
Haitian	29 years

Without adequate training or English language skills, these adults are severely limited in their career choices, and, if they are able to work at all, qualify only for low-wage, unskilled jobs. And to make matters worse, even those immigrants who were highly educated in their own countries have major language and culture obstacles to overcome before they can make a living wage. Life at or near the minimum wage has an unpleasant sameness everywhere in America. The growing number of immigrant workers who can get only minimum wage work find themselves trapped in an economic twilight where they are working for less than a living.

A US Department of Labor study has predicted that "between 1990 and the year 2000, "immigrants will represent the largest share of the increase in the population and the workforce since World War I. This comes at a time when low skilled jobs, demanding little or no English, are declining" (Johnston and Packer) . A report on vocational education also echos the trend towards higher-skill jobs, and points out the opportunities that the shift to a service-based economy presents for linguistic minorities. The employment outlook is improving for bilingual persons, particularly in the health, retail and education fields. However, the report notes that unless limited English proficient workers are better prepared, they will not be able to benefit from their bilingual skills. Instead, they will have to compete for a dwindling number of low-skill, low-paying jobs while higher-skill positions remain unfilled. If that becomes the case, not only will economic well-being of immigrant populations be jeopardized, but also to a large extent, the United States' ability to compete globally.

Current indicators, both quantitative and qualitative, show the need for more English language and work skills instruction for immigrant adults. As ESL educators, we know that adults need English skills to cope with the exigencies of everyday life in the US and to establish productive work lives in a new society. As the Secretary's [of Labor]

Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) recently pointed out, workers in the 21st century will need not only the traditional basic skills of reading, writing, and arithmetic, but also new basic skills such as "active listening, oral communication, negotiating, training others, and interpreting and organizing information and ideas" (We'll come back to the linguistic implications of SCANS demands). Our ESL workplace programs need to be designed to teach immigrants these workplace communication skills as part of our language training.

Challenges Facing Immigrant Workplace Education

First, is the sheer volume. But some of the most serious challenges to ESL in the workplace come from: fragmented delivery of services among education and training providers; limited resources at the national, state and local levels for education and training programs; incomplete information about development and implementation of successful school to work programs; and the need for more research and development to improve program design, curricula, methodology, and assessment.

A second challenege involves fragmentation of the delivery of services. In order to deliver services to students, a program must manage the interplay of several components: the number of students to be served; space allocations; staffing considerations (including professional background of available teachers); and program design, including an articulated sequence of courses to develop English language proficiency, curricular and instructional materials, and assessment instruments to measure progress. Across the vast number of programs currently educating and training adult immigrants for and in the workforce, --- from the education department, the labor department, HSS (Orr/welfare) -- there is little consistency with respect to these components. There are no mandated or generally agreed upon courses or curricula, as there are in the K-12 system; there is no requirement to conduct evaluations; there is no recognized accountability system; and there is no real push towards national standards or reform as there are in other areas of education.

I mentioned some of the various federally sponsored ESL workplace programs. Then there are the state funded programs, and then we spread the classes among adult education departments attached to public school systems, community colleges, vocational schools, technical institutes, work sites, community-based organizations and mutual assistance associations. As a consequence, there is little sharing of information and insights. Indeed, most of these institutions do not have the capability of networking with others, even if they had the desire to do so. [Mention Mellon project.]

With such fragmentation, and I might add, competition, an third challenge arises: why ESL in the workplace at all? Why not encourage people to go to other ESL programs in their community? What is to be gained by linking language instruction to the workplace? A few simple answers.

1. Language is a tool with which to do something else. One of the "something elses" is work. Psychologists have pointed out that the two most important indicators of successful adjustment after crisis situations (being a refugee qualifies as a crisis situation) are the ability to love and/or recreate meaningful human relationships, and the ability to work. The workplace, then, is an important part of resettlement which can provide self-esteem. Certainly ORR has pushed early employment. (Maybe not for the above psychological reasons.) But newcomers do want to get on with their lives, and if they can work and learn in the same environment, so much the better. I do not want to sound as if I challenege the notion of a threshhold or life skills level of language. I don't. The key is not early employment. The key some early ESL, and then working and language learning together. We have generally ignored the latter in a systematic way.

2. Its good business for workplaces to offer ESL training. Studies have shown that communication at work is directly tied to the quality of services being offered, attention to health and safety regulations, less waste in time and materials, and more effective grasp of training in new procedures and equipment. And its good sense for public monies to be partnered with private monies.

3. As a language educator, I have stressed that language learning is most effective when it learned in meaningful situations and authentic contexts. ESL teachers go through great efforts to bring "realia" into the classroom. (I once gave a paper at a national conference called Every Good ESL Teacher is A Bag lady.) The entire workplace is realia. And we don't have to carry it.

An additional challenge to workplace ESL centers around whether ESL should be considered education or training. While you might want file this concern in the same folder as "the number of angels that can dance on the head of a pin", workplace ESL teachers who have worked with company training directors know that from an operational point of view, it does make a difference. Let me illustrate:

Education	**Training**
Long term/sequential	Short term/non-sequential

Abstract (decontenxtual	Concrete (contenxtual)
Knowledge-oriented	Goal-oriented
Connected	Disconnected (Stand-alone)

Workplace are involved in training in the normal course of business. They are not usually involved in education. ESL, on the other hand, is usually taught by educators. There is a commitment to the needs of the student, and to a system which fosters knowledge as well as skill. Educators come with different mindsets and different expectations than do trainers, and there is often a conflict (if not overtly, then covertly) between workplace personnel and ESL personnel.

A final challenge to workplace ESL is one of perception. Tension exists in our field between advocates of workplace education and workforce education. The former sees the needs and tasks of the workplace as central, while the latter sees the needs and desires of the worker as central. The question has been posed: "Are workplace language programs intended to empower workers, or make them more efficient on the job?" The two concerns are integrally bound together, because what comprises employment-related ESL depends on one's view of both purpose and power. A centrist, like myself, would answer the above question with "yes"; advocates of workforce education would favor empowering the worker, and lean toward worker-centered learning which addresses the needs of the whole person "to enlarge and enrich their capabilities as individuals, family members, trade unionists, and citizens" (Sarmiento), not just to help workers perform their current jobs better. This often leads to a curriculum development process where language learning based on workplace tasks gets minimum attention.

Advocates of workplace ESL, on the other hand, see a curriculum based largely on a needs analysis and a linguistic task analysis of the language and communication patterns of a particular workplace. While there may be worker input into the needs analysis, the curriculum development process does not necessarily target those linguistic tasks which develop the "whole person."

What are the linguistic tasks?

We don't really know. While there is comparatively loads of research on discourse in the K-12 classroom -- teacher to student; student to teacher; student to student; -- there is very little on discourse patterns and style in the workplace. There was some conducted by Tom Jupp and his colleagues in England in the1980s; there is some work currently going on at in Australia; and Deborah Tannen in her new book, looks at the sociolinguistic dimensions of male/female communication in the U.S. But basically, we do not have a

corpus of knowledge in the U.S. ,which through serious ethnographic research, charts worker to worker, worker ro supervisor, supervisor to worker, worker to manager, etc. communication in any occupational cluster.

Now, having said that we don't know, let me rattle off some functions that I think cut across occupational domains, -- across manufacturing, technical, service, agricultural areas, for instance -- and form some basis for being embedded in authentic workplace tasks.

To get a job (other than where your brother or cousin works)... at a minimum, an immigrant needs to be able orally to: give personal information, express ability, express likes and dislikes, and answer and ask questions. He might also need literacy skills such as reading a want ad, and completing an application form.

To survive on a job, refugees needs to: follow oral and written directions; understand and use safety language; ask for clarification; make small talk; request assistance; report progress and problems; describe processes; explain actions; and give reasons. If there are any manuals and job aids involved they need to: locate written information; find facts or specifications in text material; determine the meaning of technical vocabularly, and those enabling words attached to them, like twist, and stir and pour; crossreference text information with charts and diagrams and illustration; and about a dozen other reading processes.

To thrive on a job, and have job mobility, (what I call, to really get on with one's life) at a minimum, refugees need to be able to: participate in group discussions, give, as well as follow directions; teach others, hypothesize, predict outcomes, state a position, express an opinion, negotiate, interrupt and take turns. On a literacy level, knowing how to access and use written information from diverse sources, is essential.

A few minutes ago, I mentioned the SCANS commission, the Seceretary of Labor's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills. The SCANS report focuses on the skills that employers seek in workers, no matter what the occupation of job may be. Beside the traditional "basic skills", that is, the ability to read, write, and perform quantitative operations, SCANS identified active listening, oral communication skills, the ability to interpret and organize information and ideas, the ability to learn and reason, think creatively, make decisions, and solve problems as essential for the jobs of the 21st century, as well. Our refugees need a source for learning these skills.

What are the quality indicators?

Here too, there is little research, but successful workplace ESL programs share characteristics with successful ESL programs for adults in general. I will not take the time to enumerate those here. For workplace programs we must add:

• a good needs analysis which gets at both employer and employee needs in the areas of language and culture (and I have not taken the time in this talk to enumerate the crosscultural skills needed in the workplace;)

• the buy-in of management/supervisors/ and unions, and an understanding of what the expected outcomes are, from each stakeholder's point of view;

• curriculum decisions based on the needs analysis, funding and timing;

• attention to crosscultural (U.S. and specific corporate) issues in the workplace;

• an articulation system between ESL personnel and workplace supervisory personnel; (best of all is some short-term training for mangers and supervisors on monitoring their own speech, and understanding diversity in the workplace.)

• demonstration of results, not by tests, but by changes in linguistic and cultural competence while doing the job on the part of both the line worker and the supervisor;

• the ability to leverage funds so that programs continue.

What are Some Delivery Models?

The essential element of each of the delivery models below (except perhaps the direct hire models) is a partnership between the workplace and another entity. State, federal, or foundation funds may or may not be involved, but the workplace always funds at least a portion of the cost of conducting the classes and/or paying the employees.

• Workplace in conjunction with a community college, adult education system, or other public or private post-secondary institution. This is by far the most common of the delivery models. When the impetus has come from the educational institution, the buy-in and encouragement of management is essential. When the impetus has come from the workplace, a highly trained, flexible and reliable cadre of teachers is essential. The partnership between Levi Strauss and El Paso Community College, and the one between the REEP project of Arlington (Va.) County Adult Education Division and the Hyatt Hotel are examples of examplary programs using this model.

• Joint workplace and union sponsorship, with or without a third party. The partnership between the UAW and the major auto manufacturers is an example of this

model. Unions have also sponsored programs on their own. The ILGWU program in New York is a model here.

• Workplace and private contractor. There are now more and more private firms that contract with business and industry to run ESL training. Workplaces are comfortable working on short-term bases with private firms or individuals who offer training, and this model may become more common if more ESL professionals venture out into the business world.

• Workplace and CBOs, or literacy tutoring organization. Organizations like Literacy Volunteers and Laubach Literacy, as well as ethnic community-based organizations have come into the workplace, particularly small businesses, to do one-on-one ESL tutoring and/or conduct "classes" with small groups.

• Workplace employing its own ESL staff, usually as part of its training division. This is less common, because of the cost to the company. However, companies with large numbers of language minority workers at varying levels of English language proficiency are finding that having full-time ESL staff available gives them flexibility, and saves them time. StorageTek, in Colorado is an example of a company which uses this model.

Who Pays?

The answer to this question is both simple and complex. Everybody pays. Federal and state governments pay through grants and contracts. (Massachusetts, for instance, relies on monies from at least 15 different federal sources, including ORR, and then adds state monies.)

Employers pay in the form of direct funding of teachers, and release time and/or stipends to employees. (The amount of employer funding for "basic" or "foundation" skills, of which ESL is one, depends on a variety of factors: the size of the business, its commitment to its workers, its commitment to education/training in general, the economic status of its industry, its market share, etc. The range of funding runs between a few thousand dollars for a short-term seminar to hundred of thousands of dollars for on-going programs. For a mid-size company (50 -499 employees) the direct cost is usually under $50,000 a year, or between 10 and 20% of its total training budget. (ASTD) How much is spent on ESL, distinct from other "basis skills" is anyone's guess.)

Employees pay, in that many businesses ask for employees to contribute an amount of unpaid time for ESL classes equal to paid release time.

Unions pay, in direct outlays to teaching staff, and in the infrastructure they maintain for education in general.

Community colleges, adult education systems, and other service providers pay, not only by providing educational personnel to develop and teach courses, but by maintaining an infrastructure that can mobilize personnel and resources on a demand basis.

In general, funding for workplace ESL, is like workplace ESL itself, a fragmented, patchwork pursuit, with monies coming from a variety of sources, including a hodge-podge of federal and state agencies involved in education, human services, and labor.

However, we are beginning to put the pieces together so that workplace ESL can look like a more comprehensive whole. In many ways, we are in 1994, with workplace ESL, where we were with survival/coping skills ESL in 1978. We have no MELT curriculum; we have no BEST test; we have no performance levels.We have a long way to go, but at least we have started. I have always looked at education as that process which alters what we are, and what we have been. In the year 2005, I would like to to look back to see how ESL in the workplace has reshaped the economic possibilities for refugees and immigrants to this country. I ask you to join me in this venture.